

*(Selah)*

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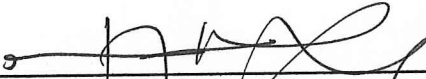
Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life  
in the Herron School of Art and Design  
Indiana University

May 2015

(Selah)

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Often used in *The Book of Psalms*, the enigmatic Hebrew word *Selah* is difficult to interpret. Most likely, it is a musical or liturgical notation and broadly translates as “pause, and calmly think of that.”<sup>1</sup> This definition resonates with my personal and creative practices as a reminder to reflect and be conscious of the present moment. In order to explore the nature of consciousness and spirituality, I employ rhythm, ritual, time, and light. Through these facets, my work attempts to elicit this contemplative pause in the observer.

The works completed during my studies at Herron which most illustrate this concept are the *Drawn Breath* series and (*Selah*). *Drawn Breath* began as a straightforward, formal 18x24” line etching, but over time it transformed into a cycle of seven cut and lit prints. In each piece of the series, the negative space of the etching is removed and several small LEDs project light through this membrane onto thin sheets of mulberry paper hanging a few inches away. Due to the multiplicity of light sources, intricate patterns of shadow are created on the surface of the mulberry screens. The imagery in each successive etching is a continuation of the prior: when viewed end-to-end, the etching plates create one long unbroken drawing. In *Drawn Breath, I*, the drawn pattern grows out of a central spiral and fills the entire pictorial plane. As the amount of drawing in each consecutive print diminishes, the amount of light projected through the paper increases—in an ebb and flow of sorts. Flow is also present in (*Selah*), which is a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Christadelphian Advocate*

series of large scale, cut paper scrolls (51"x30') depicting a similar drawing motif to that of *Drawn Breath* and numerous other works. However, unlike many other pieces, (*Selah*) is not confined to a rectangular picture plane, but allowed to develop into an organic mass with irregular borders. There are currently two paper layers in (*Selah*): one that is comprised only of the drawn motif and one that also contains several doily patterns of various sizes. When exhibited, the layers are suspended vertically for several feet before the front layer flows across the gallery floor (the back layer is cut off at the floor). The room is kept dark except for lights aimed at the wall directly behind the work. This creates a play of light and shadow, as the white paper appears dark when compared with the lit wall. (*Selah*) and *Drawn Breath* exemplify the use of intricate drawing and created environment that has dominated my recent artistic style.

The abstract drawings and etchings I create are made up of a multitude of small entities that join together to form a large, flowing mass, which is representative of the idea of the whole: an immense organism made up of a multitude of small, individual pieces. This aspect of my work is similar to Petah Coyne's large scale sculptures, in which bulbous forms are built from a profusion of small flowers and birds and coated with a thick wax. After seeing an exhibition of her work, the imagery of these pieces has left a lasting impression.

There is no specific inspiration for my personal motif. It is vaguely familiar, yet ambiguous. It bears resemblance to many things, from a tangle of unraveling string to the migration pattern of a murmuration of starlings. Recently, I discovered Imran Qureshi's drawing installations and felt that, while not necessarily influencing my work, his motif, along with other artists I have discovered, is somewhat akin to my own work.



I feel that my connection with these artists represents the presence of a zeitgeist throughout the contemporary art world.

The doily motif that I employ in my work is a reference to rhythm. While the exact history of doilies and the methods used to make them (such as tatting, knotting, and crochet) are uncertain, it is clear that they represent an heirloom craft around at least since the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Historically, there is a similar use of radial symmetry present in arts and crafts across many cultures: Islamic domes and geometric patterns, Hindu mandalas, and Christian stained glass rosette windows<sup>2</sup>. Due to its universal use, I feel that radial symmetry is innate to humankind and appeals to some force in the fabric of our being. I do not think it is a coincidence that examples of radial symmetry are found all around us—from single-celled diatoms to larger organisms like flowers and starfish. This type of symmetry also parallels macrocosmic systems like galaxies, in a way that is similar to fractal patterns.

In order to better understand my art and creative practice, it is first essential to explain part of my personal history which has deeply affected my philosophical worldview. I was raised in the Methodist Church and very involved in the youth group there, attended church camps each summer, and went on a John Wesley<sup>3</sup> pilgrimage to England with a group of students from the Midwest organized by a Methodist seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. As high school progressed, I became disillusioned with religion due to the inherent institutional bureaucracy, lack of acceptance of other belief systems, the emotionally manipulative nature of some rituals, and a feeling that my own

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<sup>2</sup> I am also drawn to Islamic art as an allusion to the concept of infinity—especially in the complex design of Muslim domes—and the function of Hindu and Buddhist mandalas as an instrument of meditation.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley is the founder of the Methodist Church

personal beliefs did not align with the dogma. When I left home for college, I stopped attending church and have not gone back. While I do not regret leaving the church, I do miss the communal nature of the congregation, ritualistic gathering and spiritual nourishment. I believe this has a deep impact upon my artistic concept and practice, which primarily is my personal search for a meditative, spiritual experience.

There is a difference between spirituality and religion; however, the terms are often used interchangeably. Either may be experienced without the other present: a person may hollowly adhere to a religious tradition without having a “stirring in their soul” and, on the other end of the spectrum, one may have an awe-inspiring experience outside of the auspices of religion. Followers of a certain religion often credit their spiritual states to said religious doctrine, but “people of every faith, and of none, have had the same sorts of spiritual experiences” regardless of their personal creed.<sup>4</sup> “It is not surprising, therefore, that individual Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists have given voice to some of the same insights and intuitions. This merely indicates that human cognition and emotion run deeper than religion.”<sup>5</sup> In an interview in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, Ernesto Pujol states that “[i]f life is about suffering, then art, like spirituality, should be about transcendence.” He goes on to say that spirituality and art share a similarity in that they “are our highest human expressions” and “can both improve and transcend this moment.”<sup>6</sup> In my own practice, I find it imperative to differentiate between religion and spirituality because I am not intending to replace,

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<sup>4</sup> Harris 8-9

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 20

<sup>6</sup> Baas 198, 202

negate, or align with any religious doctrine. Instead, I create art as a means to commune with my own spirituality.

In order to do so, I create intricate drawings and cuttings as a vehicle for meditation and as a means for a better understanding of consciousness. According to the psychologist-philosopher William James:

“It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness.”<sup>7</sup>

It is through contemplative experiences that we are able to encounter what lies behind the “screens” of our minds. “Only consciousness can know itself—and directly, through first-person experience. It follows, therefore, that rigorous introspection—“spirituality” in the widest sense of the term—is an indispensable part of understanding the nature of the mind.”<sup>8</sup> Ironically, the mind and nature of consciousness may be the one thing that humankind will never fully understand; that we will be forever unknown to ourselves. In addition to the inability to comprehend this concept, spirituality often “defies expression” so that “its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.”<sup>9</sup> The Rinzai roshi, or old master, Mumon Yamada sums it up as such: “Words cannot express things; Speech does not convey the spirit. Swayed by

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<sup>7</sup> James 422

<sup>8</sup> Harris 62

<sup>9</sup> James 414

words, one is lost; Blocked by phrases one is bewildered.”<sup>10</sup> Regardless of language’s incapacity to express these internal states and the inability to master the concept of consciousness, the quest for a deeper understanding of consciousness and the self is the aim of my work.

Insofar as it is an opportunity for reflection and meditation, my process shares similarities with monastic labors, such as the creation of illuminated manuscripts, or the practices of Buddhist calligraphers. I see a parallel between my meditative methods of working and those of other artists, such as Andy Goldsworthy. Based on the documentary *Rivers and Tides*, I feel a corresponding quietude exists in his work.<sup>11</sup> The nature of my drawings allows for the creation of a restful place in which my thoughts may take shape unhampered by the distractions of daily concerns. During this time, I am in a state “in which nothing definite is thought, planned, striven for, desired or expected.”<sup>12</sup> I have no concrete idea of the final outcome as I begin drawing, but let the structures emerge out of themselves in a pattern of organic growth. Due to this, looking at my completed works, I see a reflection of my thoughts spreading out in all directions.

In order to convey my internal state to the viewer, I create serene, quiet environments enhanced through systematic manipulation—such as the lighting, air movement, noise-level, and audience flow within the space. In the most recent work, the gallery is dark aside from the light emanating from behind the work and the flow of air through the gallery is controlled in order to create gentle movements that stir and animate the pieces—this is a key element in *Drawn Breath*. The way in which the

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<sup>10</sup> Shoshanna 159

<sup>11</sup> *Rivers and Tides*

<sup>12</sup> Herrigel 41

audience views the work is also carefully considered. Viewing the *Drawn Breath* series, one moves through the space in a way that has some similarities to traditional Stations of the Cross stained glass windows in that each piece is to be sequentially viewed and contemplated. For (*Selah*), the vantage point of the space is restricted by a singular point of entry that is some distance from the hanging piece. This layout of the space reflects the long, lofty nature of cathedrals or other sacred spaces that draw the individual away from their sense of self to reflect on the greater interconnectedness of humanity and the universe. In his book, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, Robert E. Ornstein states that this “shift toward a comprehensive consciousness of the interconnectedness of life, toward a relinquishing of the ‘every man for himself’ attitude inherent in our ordinary construction of consciousness, might enable us to take those ‘selfless’ steps that could begin to solve our collective problems.”<sup>13</sup> I do not expect my art to “solve our collective problems,” but I do hope that by encouraging viewers to participate in silent reflection they will enjoy a moment of internal peace.

‘There is nothing like silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space. Sounds lend color to space, and confer a sort of sound body upon it. But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, in the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless.’<sup>14</sup>

By creating these environments, I intend to externalize my consciousness and thoughts in order to share my internal states with the viewer. While my objective is not to impose my personal spiritual exploration onto the audience, I do hope to create a place in which they may participate in a meditative, awe-inspiring moment of their own.

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<sup>13</sup> Nisker 109

<sup>14</sup> Bachelard 64, quoting Henri Bosco’s *Malicroix*

In addition to spirituality, several other concepts are important to my creative practice. Not only are these elements formally represented or manipulated in my work, but they are also present and significant in my personal worldview.

Rhythm is innate to every aspect of existence; it inhales and exhales; it causes civilizations to rise and fall; it beats the drum of war and plays the waltz of peace; it changes the seasons as the earth circles the sun; it is the cycle of birth and decay. Although flux and change appear to occur, they are mere players in this constant cosmic repetition: in fact, “it’s man who still has not learned how cycles repeat themselves, with him it is once and nevermore.”<sup>15</sup> One rhythmic cycle may have such a lengthy duration that it is impossible to detect from the viewpoint of humanity’s comparatively short lifespan.

Within a pattern, rhythms are not apparent without the intervals between each entity. John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, states “[e]xperiencing like breathing is a rhythm of intakings and outgivings. Their succession is punctuated and made a rhythm by the existence of intervals, periods in which one phase is ceasing and the other is inchoate and preparing.”<sup>16</sup> Without these lulls between periods of activity, said activities would be indistinguishable and possibly go unnoticed; without darkness, we would not appreciate light and without sleeping, we would not understand wakefulness. In my work, the importance of the interval becomes apparent when the negative space is removed, allowing light to permeate the paper membrane. So, essentially the intervals are what are captured on the mulberry veils in the *Drawn Breath* series.

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<sup>15</sup> Saramago 71

<sup>16</sup> Dewey 56

The inescapable patterns of the cosmos are the archetypes and impetus behind humankind's concept of ritual. In his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade details the multitude of ways societies—by means of their individual religions—dealt with the repetition surrounding them. In some early cultures, “reality [was] acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lack[ed] an exemplary model [was] ‘meaningless,’ i.e., it lack[ed] reality.”<sup>17</sup> A person only existed in so far as they took part in religious rituals and celebrations, which were seen as a return to a sacred time. These rituals evolved as they were adapted into subsequent religions over time, but they are still perceptible in our contemporary, secular culture—i.e. the traditional celebrations that mark the end of the year and the resolutions accompanying each New Year.

The role of rhythm and ritual in my imagery and artistic process is echoed by my use of the printmaking process, which utilizes and celebrates the multiple. Printing is rooted in the rhythms of the past: in religious works and political tracts, annual almanacs, and the circulation of the daily newspaper. The overall techniques of many print processes have changed very little over the course of history; typically changes reflect advancements in safety or technology. It is not uncommon for a printer to use a press that is a hundred years old. Similarly to many process-driven practices, the intaglio process becomes systematic as it requires that certain events must occur in a particular order: the ink must be modified and applied to the plate, and then the excess ink must be removed with tarlatan and hand wiping before the plate can be printed. Overlooking any nuanced step in the process can result in a poor outcome or period of

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<sup>17</sup> Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* 34

“wasted” time. Each time I participate in printing an etching, the process is a recurrence of past events, personally and historically.

Our surrounding rhythms and rituals are not apparent without the construct of time, by which we organize and perceive our existence. Time is relative to each species of organism: a day for a human is an entire lifespan for a generation of mayflies; however, all of human existence is a short blip when compared to the lifespan of our universe. It is only by examining a span of time that one may see the overarching rhythms. While humans tend to believe their experiences to be unique (both personal occurrences and historical incidents), when compared to other lives and time periods, we discover recurrent histories. This is apparent on a personal level in shared instances such as an individual’s first steps, puberty, and aging or on a large scale in a society’s periods of opulence and poverty.

In my work, I understand the concept of time in the extensive processes of drawing and intricately hand cutting. The most complex works in the *Drawn Breath* series took over forty hours to complete and (*Selah*) took months. As stated above, this time is utilized as a meditation. Therefore, as I am swept up in the creation of a piece, I sometimes lose track of how much time is passing. This lost time is similar to Henri Bergson’s theory of duration. In his essay, *Time and Free Will*, Bergson states that while mathematics can be used to measure time, it cannot be used to determine “pure duration”, which “the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states.”<sup>18</sup> As

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<sup>18</sup> Bergson 119, 100



I work, my consciousness is swept up in a web of multiplicities which unfurl in my imagery.

Not only does time reveal patterns as it passes, but it also plays a role in the perception of our environment and its relation to light. The light we experience was initiated in the past: the sun's light takes approximately eight minutes to reach the earth and the light of distant galaxies takes billions of years.<sup>19</sup> Although artificial light appears to occur instantaneously, it does take a fraction of a second to reach the person who turned on the light. Because there is an interval while light reflects off of our environment, enters our eye, and is processed by the brain, we continually experience our surroundings with a slight delay. So, as viewers interact with *Drawn Breath*, the projected light can only be perceived by peering into the past.

In my work, light is used due to its relationship with shadow. I tend to play with the movement of shadows by shining lights through my pieces (as in *Drawn Breath*) or by creating the illusion of shadow, such as in *Selah*. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson posits that "shadow is a reality to your consciousness, like the light itself" and "the decreasing intensities of white light illuminating a given surface . . . appear to an unprejudiced consciousness as so many different shades, not unlike the various colours (sic) of the spectrum."<sup>20</sup> These "different shades" are present in the *Drawn Breath* series as the light ethereally shifts and changes upon the paper scrims and are poetically similar to James's "filmiest of screens" separating the realms of consciousness. Shadow is also employed as an environmental factor in the display of my work. Darkening a space creates a sense of intimacy and mystery, which parallels the unknown nature of

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<sup>19</sup> Cain

<sup>20</sup> Bergson 53,54

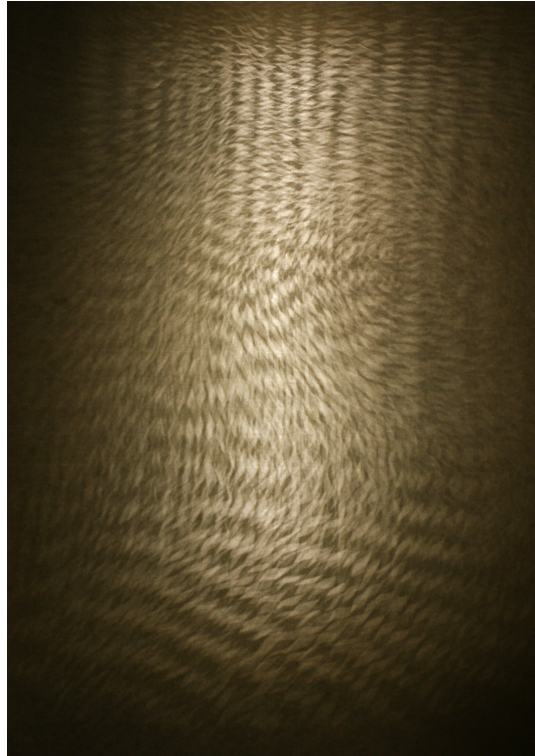
consciousness that I explore in my work. It also plays an important part in the creation of sacred, meditative environments in which the viewer may be free from distraction.

Although we employ disparate concepts, Kara Walker's silhouette pieces and Béatrice Coron's cut paper cities have influenced my work on a material level. Similarly, I have always been interested in shadow puppets like those used in the work of the early animator Lotte Reiniger. These artists sparked my interest in the process of paper cutting and the ability of such a common medium to encapsulate such involved narratives.<sup>21</sup> There are also similarities between my use of cut paper and Islamic jalis, carved stone or wooden screens, which, like veils or scrims in other religious buildings are used to create a secretive separation between general areas and holy spaces. In works of art that are cut or carved in this way, the images and patterns that emerge are latently present within the untouched substrate. Because I do not add any material to the surface of the paper, as I hand-cut my drawings, my own microcosmic universe is released from its potentiality, the work becomes a physical record of my creative experience, and, in this way, the pieces are imbued with a resonating consciousness.

By experimenting with time, light, rhythm, and ritual, I seek to understand the spirituality and unknowable consciousness of the human mind. While the physical works are first and foremost artifacts of my personal experience, I hope that by displaying them in a serene environment, the viewer may discover a similar meditative experience.

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<sup>21</sup> I feel that to a small extent my work displays a narrative quality, insofar as flow and movement are narrative.



*Drawn Breath, I, 24"x30," cut etching projected onto paper screen, 2013-2014*



*Drawn Breath, II, 24"x30," cut etching projected onto paper screen, 2014*



*Drawn Breath* series, installation view, 2013-2014



*(Selah)*, 51"x30', cut paper, 2014-2015





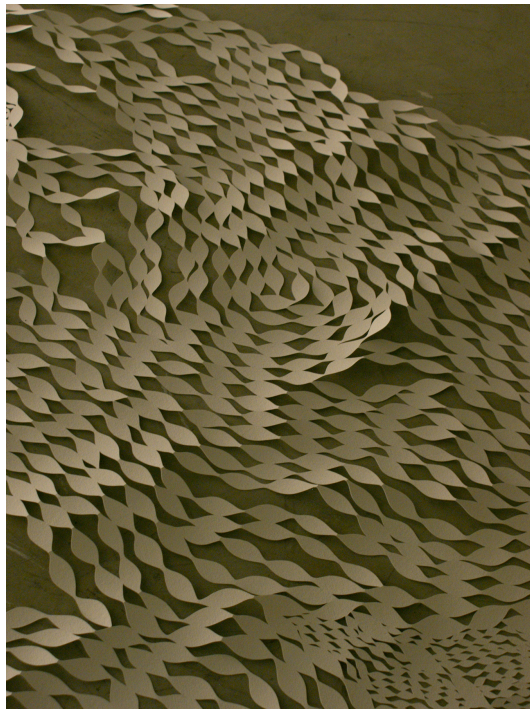
*(Selah)*, 51"x30', cut paper, 2014-2015 (detail)



*(Selah)*, 51"x30', cut paper, 2014-2015 (detail)



(*Selah*), 51"x30', cut paper, 2014-2015 (detail)



(*Selah*), 51"x30', cut paper, 2014-2015 (detail)



*(Selah)*, 51"x30', cut paper, 2014-2015 (detail)

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